

Book Review

Jean Paul Marat: Scientist and Revolutionary

Clifford D. Conner. *Jean Paul Marat: Scientist and Revolutionary*. Revolutionary Studies. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1997. xiii + 285 pp. Ill. \$55.00.

The intent of this biographical study is to correct what Conner sees as the shortcomings of earlier biographies, which have disproportionately emphasized the last four years (1789-93) of Marat's fifty-year life. Marat was a physician and scientist from 1765 to 1789 before becoming a revolutionary. More than half the book traces the trajectory of his life before the Revolution. Nearly one hundred pages are devoted to describing his ideas and experiments on heat, light, and electricity, and placing them in relation to other ideas current at the time.

Conner's purpose is to discredit the *légende noire* of Marat as an insane monster, criminal, and charlatan, which arose shortly after his death and has continued to inform historical scholarship into the twentieth century. Typically, those seeking to discredit Marat have argued that his science was charlatanism or pseudoscience, implying that since the science was fraudulent, the political ideology was equally suspect. As one of the first historians seriously to study the content of Marat's medical and scientific ideas, Conner hopes to demonstrate that his medicine and science were legitimate as these fields were understood at the time. He admits, however, that Marat, unlike his critics Lavoisier and Laplace, had little influence on the later development of science.

Born in Switzerland, Marat studied in Bordeaux, Paris, Scotland, and England. In London, he established himself as a moderately successful medical practitioner for ten years before receiving a medical degree from St. Andrews University in 1775. The diploma was signed by William Buchan and Hugh James; as was not unusual for the time, the degree was based on the expertise that he had gained from his practice rather than on any classes attended.

In 1776 Marat returned to Paris, where he quickly attracted an aristocratic clientele. In addition to maintaining a lucrative private practice, he received an annual stipend of 2,000 livres as physician in the household of the comte d'Artois, brother of Louis XVI, who would in 1824 ascend to the throne as Charles X. Despite the facts that the Faculty of Medicine shunned Marat and the Royal Society of Medicine questioned the validity of his pharmacology, Conner argues that licensing procedures remained a matter of royal prerogative, and hence Marat had obtained all the legitimacy he needed under the Old Regime.

Marat's transition from physician to physicist in 1783 occurred quite naturally: his work on the diseases of the eye stimulated an interest in optics, and his interest in electrotherapy brought him to study electricity. Aristocratic patrons subsidized his science just as they had patronized his medical practice; and again, he found himself at odds with institutional authority, this time embodied in the Academy of Sciences. At one point, Conner argues that the antagonism that developed was not primarily institutional but originated in differing approaches to science: Marat challenged Newtonian optics at a time when Newton's theories had become orthodoxy. At another point, however, Conner suggests that the rejection of Marat's ideas seemed to be based more on personal antipathies with people like Lavoisier and Condorcet than on rational scientific criteria. **[End Page 766]**

In his introduction, Conner notes that the two sections of the book--Marat the physician-scientist, and Marat the revolutionary--could easily be read independently of each other. This is true, but in its own way perplexing. One never quite understands the psychology of this man, who was an outsider challenging the monopoly of monarchical institutions while at the same time remaining a consummate insider, benefiting from a social structure that he would ultimately seek to destroy.

This is a well-researched book that takes a novel approach and is to be recommended to those who seek to reappraise the science. At the same time, it describes the Revolution in a way that even the novice can understand.

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